

The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood

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Authors' note

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Abstract

Collective victimhood, which results from the experience of being targeted as members of a group, has powerful effects on individuals and groups. The focus of this Special Issue is on how people respond to collective victimhood and how these responses shape intergroup relations. We introduce the Special Issue with an overview of emerging social psychological research on collective victimhood. To date, this research has focused mostly on destructive versus positive consequences of collective victimhood for relations with an adversary group, and examined victim groups' needs, victim beliefs, and underlying social identity and categorization processes. We identify several neglected factors in this literature, some of which are addressed by the empirical contributions in the current issue. The Special Issue offers novel perspectives on collective victimhood, presenting findings based on a diverse range of methods with mostly community samples that have direct and vicarious experiences of collective harm in different countries.

Key words: Collective victimhood, victimization, group-based violence, reconciliation

Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood

A dark side of human ingenuity is that it offers groups a multitude of methods to inflict pain on one another. Victim groups' reactions to such pain can vary dramatically. To illustrate, in responding to his Holocaust experiences, Viktor Frankl (1946) highlights the importance of the human capacity to make sense of suffering, which, he argues, enables human beings to endure any harm. For others, such a response can add further insult to their suffering because it may inadvertently give meaning to extremely violent actions (Arendt, 1963) and be seen as an attempt to exonerate the perpetrators (Miller, 2002).

The way a victim group responds to its suffering not only affects the quality of its relationship with the perpetrator group, but it can also fuel further violence in other contexts—or motivate solidarity with others in need. To better understand victim groups' reactions to collective victimization and the consequences of these responses, we dedicate this Special Issue to examining both how groups respond to and make sense of their experiences of collective victimization and how these responses affect intergroup relations. In this introduction we define collective victimhood, outline the complex and diverse landscapes, dimensions, and forms of collective suffering, and take stock of recent theoretical and empirical developments within the social psychology of collective victimhood. Following a discussion of neglected areas within the study of collective victimhood, we introduce the current contributions to this Special Issue.

Collective Victimhood: Definition and Dimensions

Collective victimization results from collective violence, which has been defined as “the instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group—whether this group is transitory or has a more permanent identity—against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives” (WHO, 2002, p. 215).

While collective victimization refers to the objective infliction of harm by one group toward another, *collective victimhood* refers to the psychological experience and consequences of such harm. These consequences may entail victimization-related affect, cognitions, and behaviors that shape the group's collective identity as well as their interactions with other groups. To be precise, most instances of collective victimhood are preceded by some form of victimization, whereas not every act of victimization results in a state of victimhood.

Collective victimization includes many different forms and dimensions. One important distinction is between collective victimization due to structural versus direct violence (Galtung, 1969). Structural violence entails harm that is done by creating discriminating societal structures and practices, resulting in inequalities in health, housing, education, employment, etc. that can impact life expectations (see also Christie, Tint, Wagner, & Winter, 2008). Collective victimization resulting from direct violence includes colonization, occupation, slavery, ethnic conflict, terrorism, hate crimes, war, and genocide. Victim groups may also be exposed to *both* direct and structural violence simultaneously, or they may endure one form after another.

These forms of collective victimization differ along several dimensions that may play a role in determining peoples' responses to collective victimhood and should therefore be distinguished. This includes the temporal scope (e.g., one-time or short-term events vs. victimization that is sustained over long periods of time); the totality of the group's destruction (i.e., whether individual group members are targeted or the group as a whole); and whether the violence is symmetric versus asymmetric – that is, how much power the victimized group has in relation to the perpetrator group. Sometimes there are clear power asymmetries with an obvious perpetrator group and a victim group (e.g., slavery or many genocides), while in many other cases both sides are victims and perpetrators. Even when both sides commit and are targeted by

violence there can be stark power asymmetries. Symmetric conflicts, where both sides have equal degrees of power such as in wars between comparable nation states, are relatively rare.

Collective victimization affects multiple dimensions of the group's existence (see Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012, for a review): First, there is the *physical dimension of suffering*. In contexts of direct violence, this involves physical injuries and deaths; in the case of structural violence likewise physical well-being, life expectations, and overall quality of life are affected. The *material dimension of suffering* includes destruction and loss of property in the case of direct violence and aspects such as employment and the ability to build wealth in the case of structural violence. The *cultural dimension of suffering* varies across direct and structural violence primarily in degree rather than content. That is, in both contexts, one's worldview, way of life, cultural continuity, norms, values, language, etc. (Gone, 2008) may be under threat (see also Wohl & Branscombe, 2010), with this threat being more intense in the context of direct violence. Each of these dimensions of collective victimization, by themselves or combined, can constitute the psychological dimension of suffering, leaving groups with a sense of psychological trauma or distress (Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006). Both structural violence and direct violence often have a negative impact on group members' psychological well-being (e.g., Canetti-Nisim et al., 2010; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014).

Given how pervasive is this impact of collective victimization, it is not surprising that it also extends to group members who did not experience the harm-doing directly but identify with the targeted group. Indirect experiences of collective victimization can occur due to exposure to violence during a violent event (e.g., Canetti-Nisim, Halperin, Sharvit, Hobfoll, & 2009; Penic, Elcheroth, & Spini, 2016), but also when there is geographic (e.g., Wayment, 2004) or temporal distance to the events (e.g., Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). In these cases, the suffering of some

ingroup members can be transmitted and vicariously experienced by other group members (Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006). In addition to media and history books, collective victimhood can be transmitted through family narratives (Wohl & van Bavel, 2011) as well as shared societal beliefs and conflict narratives (Bar-Tal, 2000; Ben Hagai, Hammack, Pilecki, & Aresta, 2013). Nevertheless, the effects of collective victimization may differ depending on whether or not people experienced the effects directly (e.g., Elchereth, 2006). Accordingly, it is important to distinguish between direct and indirect collective victimhood, as well as historical versus present-day, ongoing victimization. Notably, most social psychological research on the topic has not made these distinctions explicit but instead examined collective victimization as if it were a homogenous experience and construct.

Social Psychological Consequences of Collective Victimhood: Review of Previous Research

Although many research topics in the early years of social psychology were stimulated by experiences of fascism and World War II (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford, 1950; Milgram, 1974; Sherif, 1966), much of this research has focused on understanding why human beings commit or accept prejudice and violence, rather than understanding the experience of those who become a target of it. While some research on collective victimhood, such as on siege mentality (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992), was already published over two decades ago, it is only in the recent few years that this topic has gained more traction in the field of social psychology. In part, this is due to the increasing focus on human rights and trauma, which went hand in hand with the Truth and Reconciliation commissions that were conducted after the end of the Apartheid in South Africa and many other parts of the world (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Moscovici & Pérez, 2007). Thus, increased interest in collective victimhood, including its social psychological underpinnings, is in line with the current *Zeitgeist*.

So far, the scarce social psychological research on collective victimhood has focused mostly on how these experiences affect intergroup relations between the victim and perpetrator group or between conflict parties—either negatively in terms of increased hostility, reduced trust and willingness to acknowledge the ingroup’s harm-doing; or positively in terms of increased willingness for forgiveness and reconciliation. The bulk of this research has examined three main processes that help explain these outcomes: first, victim groups’ *needs* in the aftermath of violent conflict; second, *victim beliefs and construals* regarding the ingroup’s victimization; and third, *social identity and categorization* processes among victim groups.

The Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation

The basic premise of the Needs-based Model for Reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, for a review see Nadler & Shnabel, 2015) is that individuals and groups assess themselves and each other along two distinct identity dimensions, namely: the agency dimension subsuming traits such as influence and strength, and the moral dimension comprising morality and warmth (Abele & Wojciszke, 2013). Following the experience of an atrocity, the victimized group experiences their sense of agency as diminished. However, because people are motivated to maintain their positive identities, the victim group is expected to develop the need to restore their agency and to reduce their sense of degradation. In contrast, the perpetrator group responsible for the atrocity is likely to suffer from a threat to their moral dimension; i.e., the threat of being excluded from the moral community. Consequently, the perpetrator group is motivated to restore their impaired moral dimension. The needs-based model for reconciliation states that these needs can be satisfied through an exchange of interactions, for example, when the perpetrator group empowers the victim by offering an apology and the victim group in turn accepts the perpetrator group into their moral community by forgiving them.

Empirical evidence has accumulated in support of the needs-based model across different intergroup relations (Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009; Liberia, Mazziota, Feuchte, Gausel, & Nadler, 2014; Shnabel, Dovidio & Nadler, 2014; Siem, von Oetingen, Mummendey & Nadler, 2014), demonstrating that indeed conflicting groups experience distinct psychological needs as a function of their role in the conflict (Shnabel et al., 2009, 2014). Further, consistent with the model's predictions, messages that reaffirmed perpetrators' social inclusion and the victims' power and control ameliorated the threat to their needs for communion and agency respectively, which resulted in a greater readiness for reconciliation (for reviews see Nadler & Shnabel, 2015; Shnabel & Nadler, 2015).

In addition to the need for agency and empowerment, it has been argued that victim groups need to have their victimization acknowledged (e.g., Minow, 1998; Staub, 2008). Indeed, some initial research in the context of intergroup conflict, genocide and mass atrocities shows that perceived acknowledgment of the ingroup's victimization by the other conflict party or the perpetrator group improves outgroup attitudes (Alarcón-Henríquez et al., 2010) and increases willingness to make concessions on divisive issues, conciliatory attitudes, trust, as well as psychological well-being (Hameri & Nadler, 2017; Vollhardt, Mazur, & Lemahieu, 2014). Additionally, receiving acknowledgment from others (e.g., a third-party) that a group is decidedly the greatest victim of a conflict can make its members more willing to reconcile with its adversary outgroup (SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Halabi, 2015). This granting of the greater victim status, however, is a problematic form of acknowledgment because it comes at the expense of denying or downplaying the other side's victimization and can trigger competition over victimhood, one of the specific victim beliefs that we discuss in the following.

Victim Beliefs

When people think about their ingroup's victimization, it can have detrimental effects on intergroup relations. For example, reminders of historical victimhood resulted in reduced collective guilt for harm-doing in a present-day, unrelated conflict (Wohl & Branscombe, 2008) and reduced intergroup trust toward other outgroup members in the present (Rotella, Richeson, Chiao, & Bean, 2012). Importantly, these studies suggest that the effects of collective victimhood extend beyond the immediate context of victimization and affect relations with outgroups that were not responsible for the ingroup's victimization.

While these studies show the effects of merely reminding people of their ingroup's victimization in general, a considerable amount of research has examined specific ways in which the ingroup's victimization can be construed, and how these victim beliefs differentially impact intergroup relations. So far, the research has focused on three types of victim beliefs: 1) *comparative victim beliefs*, which compare the ingroup's victimization and other groups' suffering; 2) *lessons of collective victimhood*, which include the rights and responsibilities people believe their group has as a consequence of its victimization; and 3) *event-construals of victimhood*, which focus on characteristics of the events from which the ingroup suffered.

Comparative Victim Beliefs. One way in which group members may think about their group's victimization is by comparing it to other groups' suffering. This specific group of victim beliefs has inspired a lot of the research on collective victimhood; presumably because of their powerful effects on attitudes toward reconciliation and the other conflict party. The most commonly studied comparative victim belief so far is competitive victimhood.

Intergroup competitive victimhood. The Intergroup Competitive Victimhood model views victimhood as a unique psychological resource over which conflicting groups often compete, irrespective of their roles in the conflict (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis,

2008; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008; for a review see Noor et al., 2012). Competitive victimhood reflects the motivation of conflicting groups to establish that their group has suffered more than their adversarial group. The motivation for competitive victimhood is underpinned by the nature of intergroup relations, which has often been characterised as inherently competitive (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Sherif, 1966). Groups may compete over any or all aspects of collective victimization discussed earlier (Noor et al., 2012): the physical dimension (i.e., which side has suffered from a higher death toll or more injuries); the material dimension (i.e., who has lost more resources in the conflict or who is more severely deprived, relative to each other; Runciman, 1966); the cultural dimension (i.e., who has been more forced to give up their ways of life); and the psychological dimension (i.e., which group's psychological well-being has been more severely affected). Additionally, groups may compete over the moral dimension of suffering and the perceived legitimacy of *who* is a victim (see also Ferguson, Burgess, & Hollywood, 2010). This involves the perception that “not only have we suffered more but our suffering was decidedly more unjust than that of the other group”. Even when a group suffers more objectively, their adversary group may still debate the legitimacy of their respective suffering and whether the suffering was brought on by the victim group itself.

Given that typically notions of weakness, helplessness, low agency, and humiliation are associated with the victim status, it may seem counterintuitive that groups would engage in competition over victimhood. Such a paradox is resolved when examining the psychological and social functions of competitive victimhood (Noor et al., 2012). For example, group leaders can bolster ingroup cohesiveness and strengthen identification with the ingroup by recounting and constructing strategically their historical narratives of suffering such that the ingroup is portrayed as the ‘bigger’ victim. Assuming the role of the (greater) victim can also entitle groups to justify

ingroup violence (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008), including what is viewed as defensive and preemptive violence against perceived threats (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Ignatieff, 1993). In post-conflict settings, this strategy can help groups deny responsibility for the harm done by them to the other group, given that competitive victimhood would portray their violence as provoked by the outgroup (Noor et al., 2012; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). For example, in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, competitive victimhood among Serbian adolescents predicted less willingness to acknowledge war atrocities committed by Serbs (Čehajić & Brown, 2010). Finally, third parties can provide conflicting groups with moral and material support. To vie for such support, groups may engage in competitive victimhood and portray themselves as the more innocent, victimized group (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Noor et al., 2012). For example, inclusive victim narratives (discussed below) reduced competitive victimhood only when people were less concerned that acknowledging the outgroup's suffering in a conflict would result in the ingroup losing third-party support (Adelman, Leidner, Unal, Nahhas, & Shnabel, 2016).

Research across different contexts shows that competitive victimhood predicts more negative attitudes toward the other conflict party and toward resolving the conflict. For instance, among Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, competitive victimhood was associated with lower intergroup empathy and trust as well as with higher ingroup identification. In turn, trust and ingroup identification predicted less and more justification of past use of violence, respectively (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). Competitive victimhood also predicted decreased intergroup forgiveness among the proponent and opponent groups of Pinochet's military dictatorship in Chile (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez et al., 2008) and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013). In contexts of structural violence, Sullivan, Landau,

Branscombe, and Rothschild (2012) demonstrated that people utilize competitive victimhood as a strategy to restore their ingroup's moral identity following accusations that their group had harmed others.

Inclusive victimhood. In contrast to competition over victimhood, another comparative victim belief can also entail acknowledging that the outgroup has suffered in similar ways to the ingroup. This belief is also referred to as inclusive victim consciousness (for a review see Vollhardt, 2015) or common victimhood (Shnabel et al., 2013). Inclusive victim consciousness predicts positive intergroup attitudes, both within a conflict setting and toward other victim groups. For example, drawing both groups' attention to their common suffering as a result of the regional conflict reduced the tendency to engage in competitive victimhood and increased willingness for forgiveness (Shnabel et al., 2013). Similarly, inclusive victimhood predicted forgiveness and endorsement of peace visions among Israeli Jews (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Doosje, 2015); and among Israeli Jews and Turkish Kurds' exposure to inclusive victim narratives reduced competitive victimhood and support for aggressive policies under certain conditions (Adelman et al., 2016). Similar effects were also found in post-conflict settings. Inclusive victim consciousness predicted willingness for reconciliation among Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland when this inclusivity was broad rather than selectively focused on certain kinds of suffering close to what the ingroup had experienced (Cohrs, McNeill, & Vollhardt, 2015). In Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, inclusive victim consciousness predicted support for inclusive leaders and willingness to speak out on behalf of other groups (Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015).

Finally, some research has also examined how inclusive victim beliefs extend to predict solidarity with and support for other victim groups who are not adversaries in a conflict or

otherwise related to the ingroup's victimization. This includes minority groups' support for refugees (Vollhardt, Nair, & Tropp, 2016), Jewish Americans' support for victims in Darfur and for shared memorials with other victim groups (Vollhardt, 2013); and more generally solidarity between different minority groups that have been targeted by direct and/or structural violence (Craig & Richeson, 2012, 2016; Vollhardt, 2015).

Lessons of Collective Victimhood. A second set of victim beliefs involve the different lessons that can be drawn from the ingroup's experience of collective victimization. Klar, Schori-Eyal, and Klar (2013) distinguish four lessons that Jews have drawn from the Holocaust: First, never to be a passive victim. This can help explain legitimization of harm-doing against perceived adversary groups (e.g., Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). Second, never to forsake one's brothers and sisters. This can help explain ingroup-strengthening behaviors resulting from perceived existential threat to the ingroup, such as supporting ingroup members who were experiencing discrimination (Wohl, Branscombe, & Reysen, 2010). A third lesson is to never be a bystander, which relates to the findings on inclusive victim consciousness predicting support for victimized outgroups (Vollhardt, 2013; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015; Vollhardt et al., 2016). These lessons were also examined in a study among Jewish Americans (Warner, Wohl, & Branscombe 2014), with items such as "A central lesson from the Holocaust is that Jewish people should assist weak and persecuted peoples around the world." Another item was "A central lesson from the Holocaust is that Jews must take care not to inflict suffering upon other groups." This idea corresponds to the fourth lesson of collective victimhood identified by Klar et al. (2013), namely never to be a perpetrator. Because this idea is also based on drawing connections between different groups' suffering, it may help explain the findings that inclusive victim beliefs predict support for peace and willingness for reconciliation (e.g., Cohrs et al.,

2015; Noor et al., 2015). This fourth lesson is also the perhaps most challenging one, and accordingly in Warner et al.'s (2014) study the perceived moral obligation to help others extended to neutral third parties, but not to those perceived as adversaries in an ongoing conflict.

In sum, lessons of collective victimhood entail both perceived rights and duties (Vollhardt, 2012) that, along with comparative victim beliefs, can help explain destructive versus prosocial consequences of collective victimhood.

Event Construals of Collective Victimhood. A third set of victim beliefs that social psychologists have studied involves the construal and characterization of events that led to the ingroup's victimization, including their scope, pervasiveness and temporal distance, as well as the level of abstraction with which the events are construed.

Scope of collective victimhood. While sometimes the ingroup's collective victimization may be seen as geographically or temporally limited, carried out at one time point and by one perpetrator, a contrasting victim belief is siege mentality, defined as the perception that the entire world is against one's group (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992). This implies pervasiveness of collective victimhood. Siege mentality has been shown to predict general hawkishness among Jewish Israelis in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992; Hirschberger, Lifshin, Seeman, Ein-Dor, & Pyszczynski, 2017) and anti-Semitism among Poles (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012).

This pervasiveness may also involve the temporal scope of collective victimhood. The ingroup's victimization may have happened decades or even centuries ago and is therefore historical, while in other cases the ingroup is experiencing ingroup victimization in the present. Additionally, both can co-occur; and people may also focus on single victimization events. These different layers of collective victimhood predicted conflict attitudes independently in a context

where all construals are relevant (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict); collective victimhood through more recent conflict events also mediated the effects of historical victimhood on attitudes toward the present-day conflict such as justification of violence and willingness for compromise (Schori-Eyal, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2014). However, with changing social contexts such as different political and economic conditions, the importance of historical victimhood can fade over generations, resulting in improved intergroup relations (Rimé, Bouchat, Klein, & Licata, 2016).

Level of abstraction. Events leading to the ingroup's collective victimization can also be construed in more or less abstract terms, which has different consequences for intergroup relations. Among Jewish and Indigenous Canadians, describing the ingroup's victimization on a higher level of abstraction as an example of atrocities that human beings commit against each other (rather than describing it in terms of the concrete group identities of the victim and perpetrator group) reduced the victim groups' expectation that their perpetrator groups should experience collective guilt and increased their willingness to forgive them (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). These effects were replicated among Indigenous Australians. However, in this context the more abstract construal of the ingroup's victimization also reduced their willingness to engage in collective action on behalf of their disadvantaged ingroup (Greenaway, Quinn, & Louis, 2011). In other words, the effects of such abstract construals of collective victimhood are a double-edged sword. Additionally, when the ingroup's victimization is described on a superordinate level, for example as a crime against humanity, it may actually backlash because the ingroup's distinct experiences are not acknowledged (see Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). For example, more positive effects on attitudes toward other victim groups were found when both the superordinate, abstract construal and the subgroup's distinct victimization were acknowledged (Vollhardt, 2013).

Ingroup Identification

Unsurprisingly given its importance in the social psychological study of intergroup relations more generally, the relationship between ingroup identification and collective victimhood has also been examined. Generally, this research has focused on the roles of (a) identity strength, (b) different forms of identity content, and (c) common ingroup identities between victim and perpetrator groups or conflict parties, in shaping perceptions of victimhood and their consequences for intergroup relations.

Identity Strength. Ingroup identity strength predicts both higher endorsement of competitive victimhood and less positive attitudes toward adversary groups. For example, among Poles ingroup identification predicted greater levels of competitive victimhood on a global scale (i.e., comparing one's victimhood with other groups throughout history), which in turn mediated the effects of ingroup identification on negative intergroup outcomes such as anti-Semitism (Bilewicz & Stefaniak, 2013). Similarly, in Northern Ireland increased ingroup identification mediated the link between competitive victimhood and justification of the ingroup's past use of violence (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). Additionally, in post-conflict-settings in Northern Ireland and Chile, the more the erstwhile enemy groups identified with their own groups, the less willing they were to consider forgiving each other (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez et al., 2008; Noor, Brown, Taggart, Fernandez, & Coen, 2010). Strength of identification also has consequences for health outcomes related to collective victimhood. Jewish identification buffered people who were not descendants of Holocaust survivors from PTSD symptoms, while for descendants Jewish identification was linked to PTSD symptoms (Wohl & van Bavel, 2011).

Identity Content. Other research suggests that it is not mere identification, but rather the specific identity content that shapes participants' response to collective victimization. For

example, among a Polish sample, once collective narcissism was teased apart from ingroup identification, there was no longer a positive relationship between ingroup identity strength and siege mentality (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012). Similarly, in Burundi and DRC, perceived ingroup superiority (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, Halevy, & Eidelson, 2008) predicted exclusive victim consciousness, which in turn mediated the effects of perceived ingroup superiority on negative intergroup attitudes (Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015).

Common Ingroup Identities. Finally, the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) has been tested as a potential intervention to improve relations in the context of collective victimhood and its aftermath. For example, in the context of the Kosovo conflict, among Kosovo-Albanians identification with a common ingroup that included the other conflict party ('inhabitants of Kosovo territory') predicted less competitive victimhood toward the Serbian outgroup (Andrighetto, Mari, Volpato, & Behluli, 2012). Similar findings were obtained for regional superordinate categories in Northern Ireland and Chile (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez et al., 2008, Noor et al., 2010).

However, these superordinate categories are also limited. For instance, in Northern Ireland, the superordinate category 'Northern Ireland' predicted forgiveness among Catholic participants, but failed to do so among Protestant participants (Study 2 in Noor, Brown, Gonzalez et al., 2008; Study 3 in Noor et al., 2010). This was due to a perceived overlap between the superordinate category 'Northern Ireland' and their subgroup identity category, the 'Protestant community'—in other words, ingroup projection (Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2007). Similarly, in Kosovo the superordinate category had an inhibiting effect on competitive victimhood when the independent contribution of common group identification was separated from ingroup identification (Andrighetto et al., 2012). Finally, the content of specific

superordinate categories matters. As discussed earlier, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a common victimhood identity reduced competitive victimhood and increased willingness for forgiveness, while a superordinate identity based on the two conflicting groups' regional and cultural similarities did not have these positive effects.

Understudied Factors in Research on Collective Victimhood and Future Directions

In the following we highlight what we consider to be so far understudied, but crucial factors for future research on collective victimhood. These areas of inquiry are addressed to some extent in the articles in this Special Issue.

One such issue relates to the *level of analysis*. With a few exceptions (Bouchat et al., this issue; Elcheroth, 2006; Penic, Elcheroth, & Morselli, this issue; Penic et al., 2016; Rimé et al., 2016), the study of collective victimhood has mostly focused on individuals' experiences and perceptions of victimization, rather than on collective processes. This is surprising, given that collective victimhood is inherently collective in nature and shaped by societal factors. While it is important to understand the impact of collective victimization on individuals, such insights are limited. As mentioned earlier, the impact of collective victimization on the individual and on the collective level may differ (Elcheroth, 2006). Additionally, an analysis that is limited to the individual level may conceal the impact of other key factors contributing to the complexity of collective victimhood, such as societal transmission of victimhood (Bar-Tal, 2000), intergenerational differences (Rimé et al., 2016), and power.

Specifically, *power asymmetry* deserves much more attention in studying collective victimhood, given that collective victimization is by definition an exercise of power by one group over another (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008, 2015). Moreover, because societies in general, but especially societies divided across victim and perpetrator lines, are structured hierarchically in

terms of power, power differences between conflicting groups have a considerable impact on attitudes and behaviors—including how people respond to and address structural disadvantage and direct violence (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008; for a review see Saguy & Kteily, 2014). Historically victimized groups also differ in regard to whether they are experiencing structural collective victimization in the present, as opposed to currently being a high status group. Presumably this interaction between past and present victimization has important implications for group members' victim beliefs and intergroup attitudes. Despite the importance of power asymmetry, theoretical models and empirical examinations of collective victimhood generally have not taken into consideration its impact (see Green et al, this issue; SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2015; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2015, for some empirical exceptions). More often, researchers apply general interventions, such as contact or recategorization strategies based on the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), to improve the attitudes of victim and perpetrator groups toward each other (see Čehajić-Clancy, Goldenberg, Gross, & Halperin, 2016)—despite recent, consistent findings showing that these interventions may have ironic effects on members of the low power group such as suppressing their potential to mobilize for collective action (see Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2007; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009; Shnabel & Ullrich, 2016; Vollhardt & Twali, 2016). This raises important ethical questions of our research practices that often fail to acknowledge the impact of power asymmetry for the intergroup relations between victim and perpetrator groups and aim to reduce intergroup tension, without addressing the deeper issues that may have caused the tension and victimization in the first place (see Prilleltensky, 1997).

Another understudied factor in the study of collective victimhood is the *temporal dimension* of collective victimization. There are at least three conceivable ways in which the

timing of collective victimhood can play out: (1) the actual process of victimization occurred in the past and the violent events belong to the past (i.e., historical victimization); (2) the victimization process started in the past but has continued to the present day (i.e., ongoing victimization); (3) victimization has just recently begun (i.e., present-day victimization). There is little understanding of the consequences of such temporal differences of collective victimization both for the victim group as well as for their relationship with the perpetrator group; and most research on collective victimhood treats these different time points of collective victimhood equally, without discussing their potential psychological differences (but see Schori-Eyal et al., 2014; Schori-Eyal, Klar, & Ben-Ami, this issue).

Most research on collective victimhood and on collective violence more generally has also taken a rather *static approach in examining perpetrator-victim dyads*. This involves both the fact that third parties are usually not considered (but see Harth & Shnabel, 2015), and also the ways in which the victim and perpetrator roles are construed, as if they were mutually exclusive (see also Gray & Wegner, 2009). Conflicting parties are often involved in mutual victimization, thereby assuming a dual role of victims and perpetrators. In fact, conflicting groups may dynamically pursue the same strategies (e.g., engaging in competition over their share of victimhood) to establish their collective victimhood (McNeill et al., this issue; Noor et al., 2012). Yet, only few studies on collective victimhood explicitly acknowledge and examine the psychological consequences of the dynamics of these roles (see Bouchat et al., this issue; Green et al., this issue; Hornsey et al., this issue). One exception is a set of studies comparing the emotional needs and responses to harm in contexts where groups were only victims, only perpetrators, or held both roles (“duals”; SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014). Duals were found to experience *both* needs for empowerment and moral acceptance. Similar to contexts with

a sole victim role, duals also engaged in more antisocial behaviours in response to being harmed than perpetrators. Thus, given that in many contexts of collective violence victim groups were also involved in the perpetration of violence, future research should explicitly examine the psychological consequences of this dual role.

Finally, like most psychological research that excludes 95 percent of the world's population and studies mainly Western samples (Arnett, 2008; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), the study of collective victimhood is not exempt from such *exclusionary focus*. Although some research on collective victimhood has been conducted in non-Western contexts (e.g., Noor, Brown, & Gonzalez et al., 2008; Philpot, Balvin, Mellor, & Bretherton, 2013; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015), far too little attention has been dedicated to some of the largest, contemporary contexts of collective victimization, such as “Africa’s World War” in the DRC (Lemarchand, 2009). In contrast, as is evident from this review, much research on collective victimhood has examined Jewish Americans or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; a context of collective victimhood that may be atypical, characterized by features such as the presence of pervasive historical victimhood in other contexts in addition to a present-day and highly politicized conflict (Ben Hagai et al., 2013; Schori-Eyal et al., 2014). Thus, for the social psychology of collective victimhood and more broadly of intergroup conflict to meaningfully advance and bear greater external validity, it is imperative to broaden our focus from conflicts that are convenient to study toward those conflicts that may be geographically and culturally more distant from us, yet which may offer novel and unique insights into the sufferings of groups.

Overview of the Current Contributions

While the above overview is not intended to be an exhaustive review of emerging research on this topic, it captures some of the complexities that are embedded in groups’

experiences of collective victimhood, as well as some of the shortcomings of the literature on these issues so far. The contributions in the current Special Issue examine and extend some of the themes discussed in the above review, address several of the shortcomings in the literature so far, and introduce new topics that are important for understanding the social psychology of collective victimhood.

Toward a Dynamic Understanding of Intergroup Relations between Victims, Perpetrators, and Third-Parties

Going beyond the mostly static approach to studying the intergroup relations between victims and perpetrators, Hornsey, Okimoto, and Wenzel's article considers third parties as well. Moreover, it uniquely focuses on the dynamic perspectives of these three groups *simultaneously*. Specifically, the authors tackle the question of why victims often ask for a collective apology that perpetrator groups may be reluctant to offer. According to the authors, this discrepancy can be explained by the victim groups' tendency to appraise the harm-doing more through an intergroup lens, whereas perpetrator groups and third parties appraise the same event more through an interpersonal lens. To test this, the authors conducted three experimental studies on the impact of racial assault and murder within the intergroup relations between Indians and Australians, and North Americans (third-party group). They found that, indeed, relative to perpetrator and third-party members, victim group members appraised an outgroup assault as being typical of the perpetrator group and thus construed the event as an intergroup transgression. In turn, this led the victim group members, more than perpetrator or third-party group members, to demand a formal intergroup apology. Notably, the perpetrator groups' reluctance to offer a collective apology was not due to their effort to engage in harm

minimization. Rather, they were more likely than the victim group to seek an interpersonal apology and, crucially, were less forgiving of the individual perpetrator.

The article by De Guissmé and Licata examines the understudied consequences of collective victimhood beyond the victim-perpetrator dyad even further. Specifically, they examine factors that can shape the relations with third parties that are also victim groups, but who were harmed in different contexts. Addressing an important gap in the literature that has focused mostly on relations between groups that have been in direct conflict with each other, the authors introduce the idea that victimized minority groups may compete over a third party's recognition of their suffering. Employing both correlational and experimental approaches, the authors tested and found support for their predictions with Sub-Saharan African and Muslim immigrant groups as well as with university students in Belgium. Specifically, they found that perceived collective victimhood predicted negative attitudes toward another victimized group that has received greater recognition of their group's victimization. This effect was mediated by competition over recognition for ingroup suffering, and not by competition over the perceived severity of suffering. These findings contain important implications in that society's differential levels of recognition of minority groups' suffering may kindle tension between victimized minority groups, who otherwise could do with each other's solidarity.

McNeill, Pehrson, and Stevenson's contribution highlights yet another approach to studying collective victimhood in dynamic rather than static ways. Instead of considering third parties like the previous two articles, the authors further address a shortcoming in the literature that has mostly neglected discourse utilized dynamically and strategically by conflicting groups. In the context of the Northern Irish conflict, the authors explored the role of discourse in collective victimhood through semi-structured interviews with key focus groups and individuals

(e.g., ex-prisoners and victim groups) on both sides of the conflict. The findings of this study revealed that claiming specific forms of (competitive vs. inclusive) victimhood at specific times may serve strategic, conversational goals, such as impression management, making known their different exclusive and inclusive victim beliefs, as well as their needs for agency and a positive moral image. Ultimately, the authors showed that claims to victimhood were bound up with rhetoric. They are clear that discursive analysis of collective victimhood does not aim to reduce victimhood experiences to ‘mere rhetoric’. Rather, it seeks to add knowledge regarding the micro-level variability around collective victimhood, which can provide insights into victim groups’ concerns and needs.

Temporal Dimensions: Historical and Perpetual Victimhood

Addressing one of the shortcomings in the literature that has often failed to distinguish between different time points of collective victimhood, the article by Schori-Eyal and colleagues introduces a victim belief that not only goes beyond the comparative dimension but also explicitly addresses perceived temporal dimensions of victimhood. Specifically, perpetual ingroup victimhood orientation (PIVO) refers to the belief that the ingroup is a perennial target of victimization throughout history and by different enemies. Across several laboratory studies, findings revealed that both individual differences in PIVO and experimental manipulations of historical victimhood affected participants’ perceptions of outgroups as having hostile intentions. Thus, this contribution offers insights into the cognitive processes underlying the destructive impact of a specific victim belief that is based on historical victimhood that continued over centuries in different forms and places, but is also viewed as ongoing and connected to a present-day conflict.

Combining Different Levels of Analysis in Examining Collective Victimhood

Historical victimhood is also the focus of the article co-authored by Bouchat and colleagues, who consider the antecedents and consequences of collective victimhood due to WWI across samples from 15 European countries. Addressing the shortcoming in the literature that has mostly been limited to the individual level of analysis, they examined antecedents on multiple levels of analysis and found that historical victim beliefs based on WWI were predicted by how one's family was affected (i.e., family members fought or died) and by one's national identification at the individual level, as well as by death toll at the country level. The findings also indicate that participants noted the duality of victim and perpetrator roles: The more participants perceived their countries had suffered as a result of WWI, the more they acknowledged their own country's harm-doing against other nations. Linking the past and the present, perceived collective victimhood due to WWI further bore consequences for current international relations that were shaped by forces on different levels of analyses as well. Specifically, attitudes toward pacifism were predicted positively by acknowledging one's country's harm-doing as well as by the number of casualties in one's country, but negatively by one's family's involvement in the war.

Penic et al. also go beyond the individual level of analysis and utilize multi-level analyses of how groups were differentially affected by inter-ethnic violence to examine how these differences influence victimized individuals' willingness to forgive those responsible for their ingroup's suffering in the context of the war in the former Yugoslavia. Using an available, large dataset from a survey among a representative sample of the adult population in six former Yugoslavian countries, this research demonstrates that victims were less willing to consider forgiveness when their communities had suffered from asymmetric violence (affecting disproportionately only one group), rather than symmetric violence (affecting opposing groups

similarly). These effects of violence on forgiveness were further mediated by contact (individual friendship and regional proximity) and nationalism (viewing ingroup identity and its content as sacred). While asymmetric violence affected forgiveness negatively through breaking contact and fueling a nationalistic climate, symmetric violence made forgiveness more likely by fostering contact and reducing nationalism. Thus, like Bouchat et al.'s article, Penic et al.'s multi-level approach reveals the impact of collective victimhood in a way that would remain concealed without including both the individual and community levels of analysis.

Power and Asymmetry in Experiencing Collective Victimhood

The asymmetry of exposure to violence, examined in the contribution by Penic et al., is one way in which power manifests itself within contexts of collective victimization. As we discuss above, such power differences have been largely neglected in the collective victimhood literature so far, and therefore this article contributes to filling this gap. Another indicator of power that may affect perceptions of collective victimhood is the present-day status of groups, i.e. whether they are a minority or majority group. The article by Green and colleagues examined how collective victimhood and acknowledgment of ingroup misdeeds affects social distance in minority-majority intergroup relations, thereby also addressing the understudied role of power relations in collective victimhood. Another unique aspect of this research is its examination of “reciprocal victimhood” where one group was the victim of the other group in one era, and the other a victim of that group in a different era. In the Bulgarian context, the findings of a survey indicated that for ethnic Bulgarians (i.e., the majority group) victimhood was related to greater social distance from Bulgarian Turks (i.e., the minority group). This was through less forgiveness of Turks for their harm-doing during the Ottoman occupation, and less guilt over harm their group had inflicted on the Bulgarian-Turks in another era (forced assimilation of

Bulgarian-Turks in the 1980s). The findings for the minority group of Bulgarian Turks were different. While collective victimhood over their sufferings was linked to greater social distance from ethnic Bulgarians, it was mediated by more guilt for the outgroup's victimhood. These findings suggest that for the majority group, getting close to the outgroup was associated with restoring their moral image, while for the minority group guilt was linked to intergroup anxiety and desire for social distance. Qualitative data, collected in a second study that used semi-structured interviews, revealed that the groups gave different interpretations to the historical events underpinning their collective victimhood and harm-doing.

Conclusions

Clearly, collective victimhood experiences are complex, multi-layered, and are among some of the most impactful experiences that individuals and groups can have. We hope that this Special Issue contributes to shedding light on aspects of such powerful experiences, as well as raising new questions and perspectives on this important topic. Our contributors bring novel insights into collective victimhood across different regional contexts that have been affected by various forms of victimization, including war, ethno-political violence, intractable conflict, racial assaults, and colonization. Some of the victimization events studied in this Special Issue have come to an end, but their adverse impact seems to continue to the present day. Indeed, the enduring impact of collective traumas experienced a century ago can affect current peaceful co-existence among nations, as is apparent from several instances of historical victimhood studied in the articles in this Special Issue. Other contexts are still characterized by ongoing victimization. Although the dynamics appear similar across these different contexts, future research will need to address the psychological differences between these different temporal dimensions of collective victimhood.

To capture some of the complexity of collective victimhood, the present articles employ diverse methods, ranging from survey data from convenience samples and nationally representative samples to experimental as well as qualitative methods. What further strengthens the contributions in this Special Issue is that the majority of the samples were non-student samples who came from real-life settings of collective victimhood of different forms, in a number of different cultural contexts.

Despite the advancement achieved by the current contributions, like most previous research, this Special Issue remains limited in addressing some of the understudied factors shaping collective victimhood. Such factors, including the role of gender, social class, or other forms of power, await a more in-depth treatment in future research. Additionally, almost all of the articles published in this Special Issue report research from European contexts, and future research on collective victimhood will need to be more diverse in this regard.

To conclude, our review of past research on collective victimhood and the current contributions in this Special Issue demonstrate that initial ground on collective victimhood has been covered. However, it also is clear that there is much more yet to be studied before we gain a deeper and more comprehensive grasp of collective victimhood and its impact on victimized groups and on their relationships with perpetrator groups and third-party groups.

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